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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN ELECTION SERIES #9: AMBASSADOR DISHES OUT U.S. MESSAGE ON ELECTIONS WHILE PLD SERVES UP VANILLA

REF: SANTO DOMINGO 7132

¶1. (SBU) Following is number 9 in our series on the Dominican elections:

AMBASSADOR DISHES OUT U.S. MESSAGE ON ELECTIONS WHILE PLD SERVES UP VANILLA

Almost two weeks ago, on December 3, the Ambassador hosted senior reps of the opposition Dominican Liberation Party (PLD) to a lunch at his residence. For the third time in a month, PLD candidate Leonel Fernandez declined an invitation because of previously scheduled travel out of the country. Party Secretary Reynaldo Pared Perez and the PLD's sole national senator Jose Tomas Perez led the PLD group for discussion with Embassy staff. For this series of party encounters the Ambassador also hosted the chair of the Elections Monitoring Committee (Comision de Seguimiento), Monsignor Agripino Nunez, rector at the Catholic university. Nunez has been mediating between the political parties and the Elections Board in hopes of fostering a more positive electoral environment.

USG POSITION: NEUTRAL AND FAIR

The Ambassador set forth the U.S. position on elections: we are neutral with regard to candidates and will work with whoever wins. The overriding interest of the United States is to see a free, fair, transparent, and clean electoral process. He told PLD guests of Embassy efforts to secure support for election observes and of his initiative in getting nine other Ambassadors to visit the JCE jointly to express their collective concerns. The PLD representatives responded very positively to this and appeared relieved to hear it. (Persistent rumors in Santo Domingo have held that the Ambassador and Embassy have been working to get President Mejia re-elected.)

PLD ELECTION CONCERNS

The PLD leaders lashed out against the JCE as their "most troublesome obstacle." Their concern is twofold. Six of nine judges are declared PRD supporters and five of those six are from Mejia's "PPH" faction. The PLD seriously doubts the judges' ability to maintain a neutral stance or even to take the elections seriously. PLD indignation was fueled by reports that on November 29 President Mejia had received all five of "his" JCE judges. (JCE President Luis Arias is from the PRD but not from the PPH faction.)

Another problem for the PLD is the issue of control of the computer system and the civil register. They alleged many examples of young adults (those most likely to vote PLD) trying to register for the first time and finding their names already on the rolls with photos and id numbers of older individuals. They asserted that the wrong polling address appears on more than 900,000 registration IDs (cedulas), potentially a tactic to confuse the vote. (The law now requires that each polling booth serve no more than 600 voters, a stipulation which has led to extensive re-assignments.)

Another cause of PLD heartburn is misuse of government resources in the campaign, especially with involvement of the military. PLD reps said that at a recent event for army retirees in San Pedro de Macoris, military officers distributed shoes and make promises of trousers and pension increases if Mejia is re-elected. Campaign director Francisco Garcia and SecGen Pared Perez, strongly seconded by others, complained about campaign activities by senior level military -- citing the much-discussed amateur video that caught Army Chief of Staff Gen. Zorilla Ozuna handing out money from a PPH envelope to people on the street. They say this level of military involvement has not been seen in a Dominican election since 1978, when Balaguer made a last, furious bid at re-election.

Tax reform was another theme. Citing their comments to Treasury Under Secretary Taylor in his encounter with assembled opposition representatives, they argued the need for fiscal reform sooner rather than later. They doubted GODR bona fides in negotiations with the IMF and raised fears that President Mejia would let the economy continue to crash,

leaving the next administration -- theirs -- with nothing to work with. The PLD does not want to inherit a crisis of governability.

NOT ANSWERING THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

The Ambassador asked for PLD proposals for dealing with tough issues like corruption and tax reform, noting that if victorious, the PLD would for at least two years face a Congress controlled by the PRD. The guests shrugged it off -- Fernandez had managed through two years of congressional opposition and is prepared to deal with it. During the Fernandez administration the GODR doubled revenue with a lower level of taxes than now; good management would help the country eventually to recover and to excel. (The PLD is very willing to take full responsibility for the economic growth experienced during Leonel's administration and is currently running an ad campaign comparing prices of goods to those of today under Mejia's.)

The PLD reaction to the issue of corruption was not as comfortable. Invited by the Ambassador to set forth PLD proposals to reduce corruption and to deal with the financial crisis, they demurred with the comment that their platform committee will have answers to all this by the end of December. (This is the second time they've dodged the corruption issue with us.)

In their summary, the PLD leaders stressed the importance of a USG voice in prodding all the players involved, especially the PRD and the Mejia administration, to play by the rules.

COMMENT

Recounted ten days later, this event sounds like a predictable exchange, even a bit dreary and unimaginative -- plain vanilla. But it paid off. The Ambassador was reinforcing the USG message and building trust. The following week Assistant Secretary Noriega delivered the same message and more, big time, before the assembled Dominican Congress, and spoke privately to PLD Secretary General Pared Perez and PLD advisor Temistocles Montas in one of a series of contacts with the opposition. When pushed by the press to express some indignation over U.S. "interference," both PLD leaders explicitly turned down the journalists' characterization. They saw no interference, in part because they knew the message ahead of time and they heard it again, in private. And like other major political party leaders, they have the ear of the USG when they need it.

HERTELL